

A Small Battlefield with Many Friends



The Battle of Rich Mountain, one of the earliest battles of the Civil War, made headlines across the nation in the summer of 1861, but was soon forgotten. A small battle in a remote area of western Virginia (now West Virginia), it established an early limit to secession's reach, and dramatized a popular leader, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan. The battlefield remains a small site in a remote place, but it is having a beneficial effect on a local community and its economy. Rich Mountain battlefield is today a model of what a small group of volunteers can do, with a lot of help from their friends.

The Battle of Rich Mountain

On a rainy summer day in July 1861, gunfire shattered the quiet of the Virginia mountains. Some weeks before, Brig. Gen. Robert S. Garnett had established a Confederate fortification at the base of Rich Mountain on the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike, a major thoroughfare of the day connecting Staunton in the upper Shenandoah Valley with Parkersburg on the Ohio River. A Union army commanded by Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan sought to gain control of western Virginia and so protect the crucial Baltimore & Ohio Railroad that passed through the region. A flank attack by almost 2,000 Union troops surprised a small Confederate guard post at the pass where the turnpike crossed the top of the moun-

tain behind Camp Garnett. With one cannon and only 310 men at the pass, the southerners held off the massive attack, then fled. Union forces had nearly surrounded Camp Garnett before the Confederates there retreated in confusion.

The Union took control of the nearby town of Beverly, and McClellan telegraphed his superiors in Washington proclaiming his great victory. "Our success is complete and secession is killed in this country!" While perhaps overstated, the claim was basically true. The Union kept control of northwestern Virginia and enabled the pro-Union westerners to establish the reorganized government of Virginia, which became the State of West Virginia two years later. On the basis of this successful campaign, President Lincoln called McClellan to Washington and appointed him commander of the Army of the Potomac.

After the war, only veterans and a few local folk remembered the site of the small, but strategically important, Battle of Rich Mountain. Tangible features that witnessed the battle also disappeared. The Hart homestead, a rugged mountain-top log house that survived the battle, burned to the ground in the 1930s. The mountain's rich coal seams, from which household coal had been dug even before the war, were surface mined all around the battlefield. Fortunately, the area of heaviest fighting at the pass and many of the earthworks of Camp Garnett survived. The original turnpike remains little changed and to this day is a secondary gravel road.

Protecting the Site

In July 1991, the West Virginia Reenactors Association staged an anniversary reenactment of the battle at a nearby 4-H camp. In the process of organizing and holding this event, a number of people and organizations came together, each with their own interest in the battlefield. The Randolph County Historical Society co-sponsored the event, the Randolph County Convention and Visitors Bureau provided some funding, and cultural resources specialists with the nearby Monongahela National Forest volunteered their help in preparing a National Register nomination for the site. When a 14-acre tract of Camp Garnett land was up for sale that fall, the call for a group to buy and protect this land was quickly

A state historical marker commemorates the Battle of Rich Mountain, fought at the pass where the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike crossed the top of the mountain.



answered. Within two months, the non-profit Rich Mountain Battlefield Foundation (RMBF) formed, raised the initial \$5,000 down payment, and secured a mortgage to purchase this significant tract at the base of the mountain.

The site of the battle at the top of the mountain, as well as large amount of land on either side, belonged to an absentee descendent of the original Hart family who had lived at the pass during the Civil War. The owner recognized the significance of the site and agreed to sell the core of the battlefield to a preservation group. The RMBF approached the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (APCWS) for assistance with purchasing the battlefield. Then APCWS Executive Director H. Wilson Greene toured the site in a February snowstorm and recognized its importance and potential. The APCWS voted to purchase outright the 40-acre core battlefield (the area of the most intense fighting) and signed an agreement with the RMBF to manage the site. While committing to buying the core battlefield, the APCWS urged the RMBF to continue working not only to protect the Camp Garnett site, but also the 1.5-mile corridor containing the turnpike route connecting the two sites.

Because of extensive strip mining all around the battlefield, the National Park Service (NPS), which was conducting a national Civil War sites inventory, believed the site lost. At the invitation of the State Historic Preservation Officer, then NPS Chief Historian Edwin C. Bearss visited Rich Mountain in 1992. Bearss was delighted to find the core battlefield intact; it had been missed by the mining activity and, in fact, retained excellent integrity. Thanks to his support, and a subsequent site visit by the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission (CWSAC), Rich Mountain was named among the 50 Priority I sites in the CWSAC's 1993 report to Congress. The NPS also acknowledged

the significance of the Rich Mountain battlefield when the agency listed the site in the National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

In June 1992, about the time the APCWS purchase was becoming final, another landowner offered to sell his tract of approximately 70 acres. This parcel contained the Camp Garnett site. The Randolph County Historical Society offered the down payment, and the fledgling RMBF committed to raise more than \$60,000 for the purchase, plus the \$20,000 owed on the original 14-acre tract mortgage.

The RMBF had also been working to spread word of its efforts and build its membership base. Local news stories made the organization more visible in the community and bolstered public support. National exposure, including stories in the APCWS newsletter and the *Civil War News*, brought new members from all over the country. A second reenactment that summer helped cement the support of the reenacting community. A committed and active RMBF board, all volunteers, helped pull all of this together with no paid staff.

In searching for funds to acquire and protect the Camp Garnett tract and the land along the turnpike which connected it with the mountaintop battlefield, the RMBF applied for, and received, Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) enhancement funds. The project total of \$259,000 required a \$52,000 cash match from the RMBF. Throughout the more-than-year-long process to raise this money, we spread our message far and wide and received help from many partners. The Randolph County Development Authority (RCDA) volunteered to be our governmental sponsor. The Conservation Fund helped arrange a grant from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation for \$26,000 of the matching funds. But much of the required match was raised the hard way, through local efforts and fund raising activities. The Civil War Trust provided a grant that finalized the acquisition. When acquisition was completed, the total Rich Mountain Battlefield Civil War Site (RMBCWS) contained more than 400 acres. Three organizations—the RMBF, the APCWS, and the RCDA—owned pieces of the site, and the non-profit RMBF assumed overall management of the battlefield.

Developing the Site

In 1992, the RMBF began work on a Concept Plan to guide the long-term development of the site. Funded by a rural development grant from the USDA Forest Service, the Concept Plan provided guidance for a broad range of preservation and development priorities, including archeology, interpretation, visitor services, promotion, and management. This plan has proved invaluable for guiding site development projects, park opera-

Control of the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike, a vital roadway through the mountains of western Virginia, was bitterly contested in 1861. This section of the historic pike is now a secondary, gravel road.





A number of community partnerships have helped develop interpretive trails on the battlefield. In June 1996, local Eagle Scouts built a footbridge on the trail to Camp Garnett. Photo courtesy RMBF.

tions, and educational and community outreach programming.

While ongoing membership and fund raising efforts cover the basic expenses for the organization, moving ahead with site development is dependent on grants from a variety of different sources. The American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) of the National Park Service provided important funding for a part-time executive director to work on planning, management, and interpretation. Two grants from the Forest Service funded parking lots, signs, and trail development. The West Virginia Division of Culture and History approved a grant for an archeological survey, which was matched primarily with volunteer participation. A Benedum Minigrant project built the first interpretive signs. A Preservation Services Fund grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation enabled production of a slide show about Rich Mountain and the Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike. The Randolph County Convention and Visitors Bureau funded the first year's salary for a part-time maintenance director for the park.

Five short years after the RMBF was formed, the Rich Mountain Battlefield Civil War Site (RMBCWS) is open for visitors. West Virginia Department of Highways signs direct visitors to the site. Attractive stone and wood gateway signs welcome visitors once they arrive. A brochure about the battle is available at area information centers and at the site. Two interpretive kiosks, one each at the battlefield and Camp Garnett, give an overview of the battle. New parking lots and trails lead to historic features and help protect the site from indiscriminate traffic. Two wooden footbridges built by a local Boy Scout troop take trails across the creek to the earthworks. Littering, trash dumping, and vandalism have radically decreased.

Mowing and selective brush clearing are keeping the site attractive and the landscape more historically accurate.

This year, the RMBF plans to install additional interpretive signs along the trails, produce a new walking tour brochure, build a handicapped-accessible viewing platform overlooking the fortifications, and improve the trails. The organization also hopes to include small informational markers to supplement the interpretive signs, develop a picnic area and rest room facilities, extend hiking trails on back portions of the site, and construct a ridge top overlook of the countryside.

Biennial battle reenactments boost public awareness of the site. The next event is planned for July 1997. The reenactors' encampments are on RMBCWS property in front of Camp Garnett. Parking and the reenactments are on adjoining private property. The battlefield and fortifications are reserved for small living history scenarios and for guided tours offered during the reenactment weekend. These events are opportunities to educate the public about the history of the battle and to make people aware of, and build support for, the site.

The next big challenge is to purchase a historic building and develop a Visitor Interpretive Center for the battlefield and its related sites. This is a major step since it involves a commitment not only to rehabilitate and maintain a building and develop the exhibits, but also to provide the staff to keep it open regular business hours. Wayside facilities and visitor centers at most parks are managed by an agency with some dependable budget and resources. For the RMBF, budget and staff are still dependent on a patchwork quilt of donations and grants held together by volunteers.

What It Means To Us

Preservation of the Rich Mountain battlefield and its related sites is important for two major reasons. One is the inherent value in preserving our heritage and honoring our past. The battlefield is hallowed ground. Rich Mountain is a significant chapter in the story of the civil upheaval that helped shape our country into what it is today. It is also significant locally as a physical representation of our community's heritage and as a reminder that this place—that each place—is unique and special. By preserving our historic sites, teaching local history in schools, and raising awareness of our heritage, we help foster pride in the local community and improve the quality of life for all local residents.

Second is that by protecting the Rich Mountain battlefield and the scenic Staunton-Parkersburg Turnpike Byway, they will draw heritage tourists and stimulate the region's economy. The RMBF hopes to attract a targeted group of vis-

itors who are interested in these authentic sites, many of whom will enjoy the area's traditional culture, crafts, and outdoor recreation activities as well.

Lessons Learned

A word to local groups contemplating an effort to preserve their own historic site: it takes a lot of hard work, a lot of help, and a leap of faith. There are many sources of ideas, training, and technical assistance to help with interpretation and resource preservation. Money is available if you hunt for it, believe in your site, and communicate your enthusiasm. Involve as much of your community as possible, build partnerships, and keep cultivating new volunteers. And take it one step at a time.

To National Park Service or other government professionals who may be working with community groups: your help does make a difference. The RMBF has had an enormous amount of help from the ABPP and the Forest Service. In both cases, the support and help from the people in

those agencies have been at least as valuable to us as the monetary grants. As trained professionals, you can offer the expertise and experience that can help a community group focus its efforts and reach a concrete result. Be willing to share your knowledge when asked, and help guide them to other financial or technical support resources. In turn, they can provide the local connections that may help make your work more effective. When the enthusiasm, commitment, and local knowledge of a community non-profit group can be partnered with the expertise and resources of a professional agency, both will come out as winners—and many more sites can be preserved.

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Nancy V. Webster

Revolutionary Preservation

Unlike Civil War sites, Revolutionary War sites have yet to resonate with the general public. Americans do not identify easily with the uniforms, language, and tactics of the late-18th century. Another public relations problem is that American forces lost many major battles in the Revolutionary War. The Battle of Brandywine, fought September 11, 1777, was such a defeat—although contemporary Continentals felt they had won. They believed, as Brig. Gen. George Weedon did, that “such another Victory would establish the Rights of America, & I wish them [the British] the Honor of the Field again tomorrow on the same terms.”¹

Today, the Brandywine Battlefield National Historic Landmark, 10 square miles of scenic, rolling countryside, nearly all in private ownership, is vanishing under 20 years of heavy development pressure from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Wilmington, Delaware. The regional pattern of large, 300-year-old Quaker farmsteads is giving way to \$700,000 tract mansions on postage stamp acreage. The area is considered such a desirable

location that developers make weekly bids to long-time landowners, many of whom are senior citizens considering relocation. As the parcels are subdivided, ownership is transferred to new residents unfamiliar with the history of the area and likely to move on within five years.

Further challenging the survival of this important resource is the fragmentation of jurisdiction among two counties, six municipalities, and one small state park,² with most of the actual decisions being made piecemeal at the township level. The battlefield's proximity to the popular tourist destinations of Philadelphia, Valley Forge, Longwood Gardens, and Winterthur serves to diminish rather than draw visitation and corporate interest and funding. And, strangely enough, the region's plethora of American Revolutionary War riches has been taken for granted for so long that many people find it impossible to contemplate that the landscape and its cultural resources could disappear, assuming that an unknown, unnamed someone else is looking after the battlefield.

Ownership in fee simple, the traditional method of saving significant terrain and structures,